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Tennyson and the Spinster

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TENNYSON IS COMMONLY thought of as flirting with the idea of 'the feminine' in much of his poetry, whether in his early lyrics which often figured the artist as female ('The Lady of Shalott', 'Mariana', 'Oenone' and others) or in his maturer work such as *In Memoriam* and *Maud*, where 'the feminine' becomes a more complex and ambiguous object of desire By contrast, other poems appear as strenuously to reject such an object by replacing it with an overtly masculist cult of martial valour ('The Charge of the Light Brigade', or the notorious third section of *Maud*) Yet there is also in his *oeuvre* another strain which betrays not so much a slippage of masculinity towards 'feminine' passivity (as in 'Ulysses') as a rejection or at least a deferral of such binary opposition altogether Some of his finest poems ('Rizpah' is one, sections of *The Princess* also) are in this mode they explore 'the feminine' as a source of strength rather than weakness It was not always so

Female figures in Tennyson's poetry sport fancy or decorative names, on the whole None so fancy, perhaps, as his earliest set of young ladies, 'evolved, like the camel, from my own consciousness', as he jauntily noted afterwards [1] They were given names like Claribel, Lilian ('Airy, fairy Lilian'), Lisette ('half a prude, / And half coquette My sweet Lisette') – these girls tend to be defined by the possessive the poem 'Rosalind' was even rewritten as 'My Rosalind' – Adeline, and Madeline In the case of the last, Christopher Ricks notes that Tennyson hastily revised line 44 'If my lips should dare to kiss / Thy taper fingers three-times-three' to 'Thy taper fingers amorously', to correct the unfortunate impression otherwise given that poor Madeline was a mutant with nine fingers [2] But this point in itself, and the dexterity with which Tennyson managed the substitution, only serves to reinforce the overwhelming impression that this gallery of

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young ladies was nothing more (nor less) than a set of technical exercises for a young male poet troubled if not trammeled by his sexual inexperience, and indeed like the camel, they are exceedingly hard for his readers to swallow.[3]

Other early poems like 'Mariana' and 'The Lady of Shalott' explore more complex modes of female consciousness than do these slight and songlike pieces, and it is the extreme passivity of their heroines (Mariana being the prime example) that makes those poems into vehicles of a perverse erotic desire which was to be more fully explored in the intricate fluctuations of mourning and melancholia sustaining *In Memoriam AHH*. What is pertinent here is the overt coquettishness of 'Lilian' and her sisters, a playful strain notably missing from 'Mariana' and 'The Lady of Shalott' which marks out for the feminine more possibilities than passive victimhood – flirtation, for instance. But such activity is itself acceptably constrained by the comparative physical frailty of its agent (the babyishness, tininess, and fragility of these girls are among their essential characteristics), and can always be ultimately controlled by even a hint of any real exertion of strength on the part of the male spinner of such fantasies. As the ending of 'Lilian' reminds us, if she takes her coquettish games too far and attempts too much resistance to seduction, then

> Praying all I can,
> If prayers will not hush thee,
> Airy Lilian,
> Like a rose-leaf I will crush thee,
> Fairy Lilian.[4]

Under the prettiness lies the age-old threat of physical violence. Although Tennyson does not allow himself (or is not so drawn) to explore the dark fascination of such sadistic impulses as we find in Browning, yet these early, even puerile, examples of his representation of 'the feminine' which seem so risible now, cannot simply be dismissed as a part of a meaningless stereotype. On the contrary, it is a stereotype redolent of meaning. Tennyson's representation of women – of young, heterosexual, nubile and impeccably middle-class women – in

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his early and middle periods – was actually a powerful and highly influential prototype of a model still in vogue when it was taken over and developed by Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites, both in poetry and painting It was Tennyson in these rather silly poems who first insisted upon the erotically charged combination of the coquette and the prude, which he was to work to its culmination in the rose and the lily of *Maud* These twin signifiers of desire must be simultaneously in play for the thrill to work – earthy passion and sensual promise (the rose) on the one hand, deliciously held out of reach by moral purity and a frigid untouchableness (the lily) on the other This paradoxical combination formed a major element in what became the dominant model for femininity throughout the Victorian period

All the more remarkable, then, to find him in the early 1880s, at the age of seventy-three or four, amusing himself with such a perverse, quaint, contrary image of 'femininity' as the nameless heroine of his little-known but decidedly quirky dramatic monologue, 'The Spinster's Sweet-Arts' Her own name is withheld from the reader, although her generic 'naming' as 'spinster' rather than the more derogatory and colloquial 'old maid' is significant This is one of his poems written in phonetic representation of Lincolnshire dialect, the speech of his birthplace These poems are too often forgotten in discussions of his *oeuvre*, and 'The Spinster' especially provides a unique insight into its complexity

What are the implications for a modern reader, who approaches it with both an awareness of historical cultural formations and a post-feminist sensibility, of this oddity of a poem, this grit in the pearlshell of Tennyson's more well-known works? Does her figuring have anything in common with 'the feminine' of his early poems, just considered, or with our understanding of other representations of women of the period? Is this poem/performance (and it is, above all, a performance) another version of the well-known instance where Mr Rochester dresses up as a gypsy woman for his own nefarious purposes in *Jane Eyre*,[5] or might it best be read as one kind of gloss on *The Princess* (1847), Tennyson's experimental foray into the debates surrounding the 'Woman

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Question'? Ida with her foot resting on one of her tame leopards ('Kittenlike he rolled / And pawed about her sandal' ll 165-6) might not be so far removed from the Spinster and her pussycats As Elaine Jordan shrewdly observes, 'The idealization of love – by Arthur Hallam, by Tennyson in poems of the 1830s and 40s – can appear in *The Princess* not as a liberation from social conventions and economic constraints, but as a limit placed on women' [6] The Lincolnshire Spinster is one woman who is fully aware of the realities behind this seeming paradox

All Tennyson's Lincolnshire dialect poems are monologues by exceedingly forthright speakers The first part of 'The Spinster's Sweet-Arts' is no exception, plunging the reader straight into the scenario

> Milk for my sweet-arts, Bess! fur it mun be the time about now
> When Molly cooms in fro' the far-end close wi' her paails fro' the cow
> Eh! tha be new to the plaace – thou'rt gaapin' – doesn't tha see
> I calls 'em arter the fellers es once was sweet upo' me?

The no-nonsense country woman's voice, so apparently straightforward in articulating her feelings, plays a game of controlled sentimental nostalgia with herself and her household of two female servants She neatly turns the tables on her former suitors, none of whom, as she is well aware, loved her for herself, but, like the four cats who now bear their names and of whom she is maternally fond, were primarily in search of their own comfort and convenience at her expense As she fondles and dallies with her pets around her fireside, she complacently reminisces about their respective failures in courting her younger self Much of the comedy inheres in her shrewd ventriloquisation of their hidden desires, a strategy which effectively denies them any subjectivity while reinforcing her own Some suitors were more blatant than others the two Tommies were crass, and consequently her least favourite; Steve was the nicest (and the cleanest) but the one who almost won her was Robbie, the charmer, who flattered her best by

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putting most effort into his flattery As the rest of the poem unfolds her story, it reinforces the impression of its speaker being fully in control of her environment and utterly relishing her independence, based on her narrow escape from matrimony and her own shrewdness in placing a higher value on her income of two hundred pounds a year than on the dubious pleasure of having a man in the house This is a reversal of what Jordan notes as the underlying pitfall for women in *The Princess*, 'the idealization of love' The Spinster has instead liberated herself from social convention and economic restraint by 'seeing through' the myth of romance

Are we to read this only as a back-handed joke against the Spinster, so caught up in her own little world of kettle, hearth, milk cow and maidservants, as well as in her proud ability to dispense charity to the poor more effectively even than the Lady of the Manor (who has always to 'hax of a man how much to spare or to spend'), that she fails to recognise the true joy of what she has forsaken marriage and motherhood? This may well have formed part of the original intention, but Tennyson's imagination was expressing itself in a particular medium here, and perhaps this medium, the dialect of his early youth, of the country folk of his growing up, required of him a more salty humour, an earthiness, a sloughing off of middle-class cultural convention, enabling him to laugh up his sleeve at the part of himself that had succumbed to, and indeed milked the market in, what one might call the cult of beautification in poetry This cult had as its mainstay the very version of 'femininity' promulgated in his own more mainstream poetry

The Spinster poem has never been much noted – I have only found the barest passing mention of it in a few sources Charles Tennyson tells us that his grandfather once read it aloud, along with *The Ode to the Duke of Wellington*, to the visiting Prince and Princess of Battenburg [7] He doesn't relate what they made of either poem, but such a choice for such an audience sounds like one of Tennyson's more sardonic jokes, and reinforces the supposition that the Spinster poem's dominant intention was indeed reactionary Critics have generally not known how to deal with the dialect poems except as a

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passing freak, an amusing satire on the narrow-mindedness of the uneducated 'The Northern Farmer, New Style' with his obsession with 'proputty' – 'But proputty, proputty sticks, an' proputty, proputty graws' is a good example, the Village Wife is another, with her scorn for the bankrupt Squire's book-learning

> But 'e niver loookt ower a bill, nor 'e niver not seed to owt,
> An' 'e niver knawd nowt but boooks, an' boooks, as thou knaws, beeant nowt

The Spinster's disdain for the sacred joys of motherhood is comparable

> I niver not wished fur childer, I hevn't naw likin' fur brats
> their bottles o' pap, an' their mucky bibs, an' the clats an' the clouts,
> An' their mashin' their toys to pieaces an' maakin' ma deaf wi' their shouts

It is instead the 'brats' rhymesake to whom she gives her stock of affection, and her love for her cats in itself suggests a witch-like aspect only reinforced by her vaunted independence from the demands of men and children

All the dialect poems explore aspects of human nature that are not so much alien to Tennyson the poet as alien to that aspect of his performance belonging to the idealistic self-projection which came to constitute a large part of his reputation What we call 'Tennyson' at its most characteristic endorses those high ideals associated with the heroic – and masochistic – world of romantic love But we can widen our view and our reading to take in other aspects and other expectations this, surely, is one of the values of reading literary biography As Tennyson reminds us through Ulysses, 'I am a part of all that I have seen ' The life can suggest possibilities that might not otherwise open up for a reader of the texts alone. For a reader approaching *In Memoriam* with no knowledge of the part played in the poet's life by Arthur Hallam, an entirely different poem would take shape Here, in the dialect

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poems, the biographical context of Tennyson's early years in rural Lincolnshire has a different but not lesser importance, when set against his later embrace of (and by) the urbanised literary establishment This juxtaposition contains a strong clue to what gives this monologue its piquancy

Who better to appreciate the canny investment advice of a northern farmer than a man who lost his own fortune in an impractical but high-minded scheme to make money out of supporting the work of wood-carving? Or who more likely than one who tries to live by writing books to harbour a twinge of sympathy for the Village Wife's determination that old books are of far less use than new butter and eggs, especially when their middles have been ripped out by the housemaid for firelighters? And finally, who better placed to adjudicate with sympathy the spinster's determination not to have her nice carpet sullied by the dirt of men than the man whose earliest fame at Cambridge was for the habitual filth of his shirt?[8] The dialect poems take upon themselves the opening up of that side of representation which is suppressed in, say, the domestic idylls[9] – those inappropriately unsophisticated knowledges which belonged with Tennyson's early experiences of a country upbringing, where the everyday life and colour of a rural community had made their mark before different social and class formations claimed his allegiance It is noteworthy that none of the dialect poems was written before he reached his fifties, well after his fame as a drawing-room poet was comfortably established At this late point in his career he could afford to take some risks with his reputation he finally accepted a baronetcy in December 1883, 'The Spinster's Sweet-Arts' had been written by January 1884 [10]

Nowhere is 'femininity' more ruthlessly exposed as a merely expedient social construct than in the dialect poems, even though several of them (there's a 'Northern Cobbler' as well as the Farmers) don't appear to focus on women The 'Northern Farmer New Style' pooh-poohs any idea his son might have of romantic attachment to a penniless girl, handing on instead the solid advice 'Doant thou marry for munny, but goa wheer munny is!' As evidence of the success of such canny strategic planning, he adduces his own marriage to the boy's mother

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> Maaybe she warn't a beauty, – I niver give it a thowt –
> But warn't she as good to cuddle an' kiss as a lass as 'ant nowt?

The comic effect of these two lines, coming from the unexpected twist given to the second, acts less, in the long term, as a rebuke to the prosaic materialism of the farmer than to what we now call 'the beauty myth' Yet paradoxically, much of Tennyson's so-called 'major' output is based on the idea of an entirely necessary alliance between beauty, romance and femininity *The Princess* – with its insistence on the feminine attractiveness of its intellectually accomplished heroines (the Princess herself being 'All beauty compassed in a female form') that prohibits their too easy dismissal as mere bluestockings unworthy of male attention – is an excellent example

Of the two dialect poems whose speaking subject is a woman, Charles Tennyson prefers 'The Village Wife' to 'The Spinster', on the grounds of superior strength and grimness Certainly, the Wife *is* a robust shrewd character not unlike the Spinster in her down-to-earth free speech, and she is the only one of all the dialect poem characters drawn from life (according to an author's note) Her mainspring seems to be righteous pleasure at the downfall of the uppity folks at the Hall, and there is little variation in her harping on this theme The joke of the poem revolves around the Wife's misunderstanding of the term 'entail', a joke weighted so much more at her than with her that it unbalances the poem and tips it into caricature As a result, however, her monologue lacks the sense of play that we find in 'The Spinster's Sweet-Arts', where the pun on 'Arts' has some ready justification, and where use of the word 'Spinster' may now be seen not too fantastically to look forward to Mary Daly's 1970s feminist revision of it as a positive rather than negative term, suggesting the idea of 'Spinning' as an essentially creative activity that can well be applied to the making of poems 'ludic cerebration which is both work and play' [11]

Central to this poem's game is the device of the cat-suitors These cats both are and are not the suitors, addressed simultaneously and often ambiguously as both/either cat or man

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Yis! thaw tha call'd me es pretty es ony lass i' the Shere,
An' thou be es pretty a Tabby, but Robby I seed thruf ya theere

or

Naay – let ma stroak tha down till I maakes tha es smooth es silk,
But if I 'ed married tha, Robby, thou'd not 'a been worth thy milk
Thou'd niver 'a cotch'd ony mice but 'a left me the work to do,
And 'a taaen to the bottle beside, so es all that I 'ears be true

Here, along with the mingling of cat-identity with suitor-identity, the jokes both at and with the central figure of the Spinster are so subtly interwoven that they productively destabilise interpretation How authentically 'subjective' can the Spinster be deemed, when the speaker herself is ventriloquised by a male poet? The question can probably best be answered by seeing the poem in terms of performance the notion of authenticity can then circulate more freely The illusion of the speaker's character is remarkably consistent and well-sustained, but it offers possibilities for more than one interpretation

To go at once to the most radical kind of feminist reading, it could be argued that 'The Spinster's Sweet-Arts' lends itself more readily to modern lesbian interpretation than many poems written by women poets who themselves might well have worn that label at the time, had it been available Amy Levy, Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, Margaret Veley, for example, were all obliged to express their lesbian desire in a carefully coded manner[12] What would have been anathema if enunciated by a poetess is culturally acceptable as amusing play-acting by a privileged male It is scarcely necessary to my argument to prove that Tennyson was conscious that his Spinster might be open to lesbian interpretation, but the phenomenon of unmarried women devoting themselves to other women in romantic friendship cannot have been foreign to

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him his own sister Matilda long nurtured a 'passionate admiration' for the opera singer Theresa Tietjens [13] To his credit Tennyson gave so much imaginative energy to the Spinster's role in the poem that it is quite possible to see her as a figure of some triumph Her voice remains that of a rebel, not a victim In this reading, she becomes something of a proto-lesbian separatist, devoted not only to her pussycats but to her longterm maidservant, Molly, whom she anxiously suspects of allowing herself to be courted by a young man when she should be milking the cow One can easily imagine the local children mythologising the Spinster as a witch, which is entirely appropriate to this reading And for all this, she is lovingly (as well as laughingly) made, not drawn directly from life like the Village Wife, perhaps, but from a wonderfully sympathetic imagination R B Martin was wrong about this poem at least, when he speaks of 'a fundamental weakness in Tennyson's narrative poetry, his inability or refusal to come to terms with the psychology of his characters', comparing him unfavourably with Browning as a result [14] His humour here may be the defter of the two

What is especially disarming about the humour in this poem is that it is largely at the expense of the poet's own gender It is the males who are made into cats, for once reversing the common cliché, and it is certainly the males who come out at the end with their tails between their legs, as it were Not only is the humour angled unexpectedly, but it also sets up a complex interplay of viewpoints which is missing from the other dialect poems The reader is invited to speculate about the absent Molly and what she might be up to in ways that are at odds with the Spinster's dominant anxieties about the lateness of the milk supply Each of the four male pussycat suitors invites similar reading between the lines as their characters are judged aloud by the Spinster The children whom she hates and who run after her calling her names are equally part of the substratum of what is devalued and repressed in the perverse economy of this poem· the call to heterosexual reproduction Even the milk cow has a role in the unfolding drama

'Milk' is the poem's first word 'Milk for my sweet-arts' It represents the quintessentially female life-giving fluid, as

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Hélène Cixous recognised when she exhorted women to access their unique power by writing in milk [15] It is also the fluid which bonds mother and infant, and the ability of any male writer to recognise the mammalian function along with the sexual allurement of breasts is always a welcome sign of his maturity In 'Rizpah', Tennyson passes this test magnificently in the lines where the mourning mother tries to explain her desperation to gather her dead son's bones from beneath the gibbet

> My baby, the bones that had sucked me, the bones that had laughed and had cried –
> Theirs? O no! they are mine – not theirs – they had moved in my side

'Rizpah' is an extraordinarily fine poem, in which Tennyson shows a remarkable ability imaginatively to inhabit a woman's body The Spinster, however, is no Rizpah, devoted to the man in her life, nor is she a Princess Ida, finally bowing to her feminine destiny of 'the soft and milky rabble of womankind' (*The Princess* 1 826) For her, milk symbolizes what she has gained rather than what she has lost She has chosen to avoid motherhood for herself a socially perverse choice, regarded as loss by those committed to the cultural norm, but insisted on as gain by herself This is made clear at the end of the poem, which mingles notions of potential loss with actual triumph

> An' a spinster I be an' I will be, if soa please God, to the hend
>
> Mew! mew! – Bess wi' the milk! what ha maade our Molly sa laate?
> It should 'a been 'ere by seven, an' theere – it be strikin' height –
> 'Cushie wur craazed fur 'er cauf' well – I 'eard 'er a maakin' 'er moan,
> An' I thowt to mysen 'thank God that I hevn't naw cauf o' my oan '
> Theere!
> Set it down!

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Now Robby!
You Tommies shall waait to-night
Till Robby an' Steevie 'es 'ed their lap – an' it sarves ye right

Motherhood is here seen in a wider mammalian context, Cushie the cow standing in for the path not taken As any country person knows, cows bellow for their calves not out of excessive maternal love but because their udders swell hugely and pain them if they are not milked The suggestion remains strong that the spinster comes off rather better than the milk-cow

The best way into this poem is through its performative language and its form It is a kind of anti-domestic idyll which employs the age-old feminist strategy of using humour to cut through male pretension Tennyson's ear for speech rhythms is hard to fault, and it is what brings the poem alive not just the intonations, but the glancing allusions and unspoken assumptions that carry the weight of the meaning These break up the apparently forthright surface in unexpected ways and still allow to the poet some of his accustomed indirection

Feyther 'ud saay I wur ugly es sin, an' I beant not vaain,
But I niver wur downright hugly, thaw soom 'ud 'a thowt ma plaain,
An' I wasn't sa plaain i' pink ribbons, ye said I wur pretty 'i pinks,
An' I liked to 'ear it I did, but I beant sich a fool as ye thinks,
Ye was stroakin ma down wi' the 'air, as I be a-stroakin o' you,
But whiniver I loook'd in the glass I wur sewer that it couldn't be true,
Niver wur pretty, not I, but ye knaw'd it wur pleasant to 'ear,
Thaw it warn't not me es wur pretty, but my two 'oonderd a year

There is an interesting mix of emotions here the hinted relation with the now-dead father is one half-buried strand that could be teased out further Yet the feminist 'message' that can

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be read from the poem today is undoubtedly one that would have threatened the dominant order – that if more women had an independent income there would be a correlative decrease in the number of marriages It is a point that John Killham discerned as an anxiety lurking beneath the fabric of *The Princess* 'Whether the marriage-relationship could survive the fulfilment of women's aspirations is the real point at issue' [16] This is a part of the point made more famously by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), that intellectual independence for women has to be based upon their financial independence It is an argument that is emphatically not addressed in *The Princess*, where a fantasized aristocratic setting forecloses any discussion of everyday financial needs, even though the threat to the social fabric is seen in terms of sapphic versus heterosexual couplings Virginia Woolf's position, though, is already tacitly understood in *The Spinster's Sweet-Arts*, where the return of the repressed feminine brings with it the idea of a woman as an individual human being – a 'living will'

> Not vassals to be beat, nor pretty babes
> To be dandled, no, but living wills, and sphered
> Whole in ourselves and owed to none
>
> (*The Princess* ll 128-30)

The figure of the Spinster, then, while disassociated almost completely from conventional ideas of the feminine, speaks emphatically as a female human being Her voice – which is all we have of 'her', bearing in mind that it always remains a voice ventriloquized by a male poet – is that of a woman represented positively as a social rebel rather than a victim In this poem, Tennyson turns the tables neatly on 'Tennyson' by adopting in dramatic monologue form the position of an independent old maid who has relegated all of her rejected suitors to the status of neutered tomcats, and by performing this curious reversal with remarkable insight, consistency and humour Of all the dialect poems, it is the one that most repays a closer scrutiny

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NOTES

[1] Christopher Ricks (ed), *The Poems of Tennyson*, (1969), p 181

[2] Ibid, p 193

[3] R B Martin makes the acerbic comment '"Marion", "Lisette", "My Rosalind", Margaret all trail listlessly by, displaying by the tinkle of the rhyming short lines the real inertness of Tennyson's unengaged imagination and probably indicating that his knowledge of women at this time was neither deep nor sensual The lack of individuality permitted some of Tennyson's feminine friends to think they had found in the lines a covert description of themselves ' *Tennyson the unquiet heart, a biography*, (Oxford, 1980), p 164

[4] Ricks, op cit , p 183

[5] Rochester disguises himself as a gypsy fortune-teller while supposed to be away from home, in order to spy on Jane's reactions

[6] *Alfred Tennyson*, (Cambridge, 1988), p 84

[7] *Alfred Tennyson*, (1949), p 501

[8] See Martin, op cit , for details of these exploits

[9] 'Nevertheless, what has no place in the superficies of idyll remains a subtextual support that is crucial to the idyllic effect Written off in advance and consigned elsewhere, the painful events and feelings that the idyll works over form the basis of its sophisticated enjoyment The craft of the idyll, then, rides on a network of suppressions' Herbert F Tucker, *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, (Cambridge, Mass and London, 1988), p 293

[10] Ricks, op cit , p 1327

[11] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, (Boston, 1978), p 22

[12] For further discussion of this point, see my essay 'Sexual politics of the (Victorian) closet, or no sex please – we're poets' in Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (eds), *Women's Poetry late Romantic to late Victorian gender and genre, 1830-1900*, (1999), pp 135-163

[13] 'Amongst Matilda's papers were found several scraps of fragmentary verse about Tietjens' death and a sheet of deep-

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edged mourning paper, enfolding a lock of hair and inscribed in Matilda's hand

> This paper holds my beloved Theresa's hair – I have kissed it many times It is a great comfort to have it – oh, when shall I see her again? I shall never have another friend upon earth like her – I hope God will permit me to meet her again This thought bears me up' Charles Tennyson, op cit , p 504

R B Martin relates (op cit p 235) the family story that Matilda was 'odd' because she had been dropped head-first into a coal-scuttle as a baby This may or may not be apocryphal such stories often mask a family's unease with a potentially deviant member

[14] Martin, op cit , p 480

[15] See her now classic essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', translated in E Marks and I de Courtivron (eds) *New French Feminisms*, (Amherst, 1980)

[16] *Tennyson and 'The Princess' reflections of an age*, (1958), p 65

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